IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS / HILLEL SEGAL

'First Choice' great choice for new users

From the publishers of the immensely popular "pfs" series of software comes a wonderful new program, "First Choice" that runs on the IBM PC and PC-compatible computers and costs only $149.

First Choice is a combination of four simple, yet capable modules, packaged together for new users and others who do not need or want the advanced features of more complicated programs.

Here are the components, along with an evaluation of each:

✔ Word processing. This is one of the easiest-to-use word processing programs on the market today. Very similar in form and function to the old pfs:Write program, it takes almost no training to use. Most functions are intuitive, with "pull down menus." It drives most popular printers, has a built-in spell-checker, does mail-merges, and even prints documents with either ragged right margins or right justified margins — a function missing from earlier versions of pfs:Write.

Evaluation: The word processing module appears excellent for many office applications. However, it does not have some advanced features. It does not handle automatic math calculations within documents, multiple columns of text on a single page, nor does it do automatic file backups. But it's easy-as-pie to learn.

✔ Data base. This module is a take-off of two older, popular programs, pfs:File and pfs:Report. You can design your own input form with ease, and use this simple data base module to keep track of customers, products, etc.

Evaluation: In technical terms, this type of data base is called a "flat file" — meaning that it's one-dimensional, without the ability to link together data bases, to create multidimensional or "relational" data bases. Also on the technical side, there is no way to define which field serves as an "index" when searches are conducted. But it's also missing something else: a way to pass the data from this module to a more advanced data base when you outgrow this one. You may have to retype everything at that point. For this last reason, I'd only recommend it for small data base tasks.

✔ Spreadsheet. As spreadsheets go, it's very simple and easy to use. The part of the manual that tells you all you need to know is only 34 pages, and you can be up and running with a departmental P&L statement in under an hour. This compares with hundreds of manual pages for more advanced programs and a several-hour training period just to get started.

Evaluation: For beginning spreadsheet work, this module is OK. But later you might miss the advanced features, get tired of the slow calculation speed, and want to move on. When that happens, you'll face the same problem as with the data base module: there is no easy way to export the data to more advanced programs.

✔ Communications. If your computer has a modem, this module will let you "talk" to other computers. It can be set up to dial phone numbers, sign on automatically, and even give your password. It appears simple but really is quite complicated.

Evaluation: Computer communication is one discipline that has a lot of technical gobbledygook, even if it's presented simply. Most people find it difficult to understand all about data bits, stop bits, parity, and full or half duplex. But all these things need to be set up properly if the transmission is to work. For this module, it's better to have an expert set it up for you, and teach you how to use it.

Putting it all together, First Choice is an exceptional program. Beginners will love it because it will help them become productive in a hurry. And people who have become disenchanted with more complicated programs may find that using personal computers is not so difficult after all. It's available from computer stores or the publisher, Software Publishing Corp. of Mountain View, Calif.

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